

Head-willows in the Dübener Heide Region of Germany

Introduction

In the European Commission culture and education are joined together for policy making and funded activities but in many European states it is nature conservation and culture that are managed together at national, regional and local level. The two themes sit well together because Europe's landscapes are not normally 'natural', rather they are 'cultural'. More than 99% of landscapes in the United Kingdom and Germany have been created by the activity of mankind; most, in terms of field size and shape and the position of trees, owe their structure to medieval farming and forestry practice. Within the European Union, only parts of Romania can be considered as having a still functioning medieval landscape. In Romania, up until now, peasant farmers have been maintaining the medieval cultural landscape through their farming and tree management annual activities; they do it not for any nature or culture management reasons but because the trees and the land supply on an annual basis a huge list of local and sustainable products from pickled cucumbers to sheep cheese to willow withies for baskets to branches for fences with no metal wire. Although the Romanian peasant farmers are not deliberately promoting excellent cultural and natural benefits, their landscapes are havens of biodiversity and examples of the purposeful retention of traditional skills. Over the rest of Europe cultural medieval landscapes have been abandoned or more often converted to industrially-farmed uniform landscapes. Cultural and environmental sustainability has been sacrificed on the altar of economy.

Where medieval land management practices are retained in Germany and the United Kingdom, such as tree pollarding (harvesting wood products above the head height of grazing animals), it is often supported by European and national grant aid. In these hard times of economic recession, the importance of volunteers in maintaining cultural landscape becomes more and more important. So, the EVEHD ('Engaging Volunteers in European Heritage Discovery') has spent some time in Germany, Slovakia, Romania and the United Kingdom, in engaging volunteers that are interested in natural as well as cultural heritage.



Just pollarded willows in Görschitz Germany

There is an old method of managing trees; we call it pollarding. It is carried out on willow (*Salix*), hazel (*Corylus*), linden (*Tilia*), plane (*Platanos*), ash (*Fraxinus*), poplar (*Populus*) and a few other broadleaved trees. In lots of cases it is part of the farm rather than forestry practice. The cut branches may be used for animal feed, as building material, basket-making, woven fences, heating bread ovens, toll handles or

broom making; the number of sustainable cultural products is very large. It is in general a method to use materials from trees or to adapt the size of a tree to human demands.

In the old days the pollard trees were a landscape feature that were found in lots of European regions. Because of the modern farming, the lack of hand labour and the replacement of the products of pollarded trees, this type of tree becomes rare. Environmentalists like to support this type of tree because they provide special habitat for birds and insects and it is a green element of the landscape; it is also a critical element of cultural landscape that society wants.



Volunteers in action helping to keep this type of tree



Pollards 2 years' after cutting

In the Dübener Heide region pollarding of trees was common for lime / linden (*Tilia*) and willow trees; the pollarding of lime was related to the production of rope but this tradition passed away a long time ago (only found now in parts of Norway). Already before the World War II there was easier and cheaper fibre available like hemp and sisal. The polypropylene rope which was developed after the war brought this lime rope finally to an end.

The tradition to pollard willows remained for longer until quite recently. It is often an element of landscapes which are used for grazing animals on meadows close to rivers or on wet places. The twigs were used traditionally for weaving but not for baskets; fences were made out of it and tool shafts. Also the cut twigs were a method of providing mineral food to farm animals through eating the tree bark. In times of food shortage, the animals eat the living shoots of the pollarded trees. Often the shape of the trees is developing by grazing animals eating all living shoots on the bottom and men cutting the tops from time to time.

In the EVEHD Project we did talk about these methods in different countries, as a way of describing how cultural landscapes were created. In Germany, Romania and Slovakia this method is still done to willow and in England it is more common to ash. The interval of the rotation between cutting is done in a timespan between 1 and 10 years.



Pollarded ash tree in Borrowdale, England

The traditional tool to do this was an axe or hand saw. In this days you normally use a chainsaw to work on the trees but to work with this tool inside the treetop does not fit in to the modern safety standards. To keep within the safety standard, you need a scaffolding or a fork lifter to work safe. So it is nothing for untrained persons because to work in to trees

which have not been pollarded for years is very dangerous.

During the time of EVEHD we did in Germany different actions to maintain the tradition. It always was done between December and February. Volunteers from Germany and some of the partner countries took part on these actions. A training about the old method of this landscape management was provided to the participants. And they have been happy to learn something about landscape management, traditional use of the products and to do something on a voluntary basis to support the wildlife.

The good thing about this management is also the office of Agriculture and Environment supports this method of tree management with some money and we have been able to cover some of the costs to do this management.

The importance for EVEHD

For EVEHD, the work in Germany in Dübener Heide allowed us to link together heritage engagement in 4 of the 6 EVEHD partner countries, showing that working with pollarded and coppiced trees for maintaining cultural landscape was an important ay to engage volunteers in heritage discovery. It also allowed us to tell stories about medieval land management and invite comment from ‘virtual volunteers’ through the internet. This resulted in some great discussions and images being shown such as this medieval manuscript that (right) shows the pollarding and the fencing we work so hard to retain.



To learn and to have a training about land management is meaningful for lots of people. After a long time when many persons left the rural area and left the land management to the old persons which stay it seems there is a bigger interest from the public then it was a few years ago. Volunteers like to learn about Nature protection and they are willing to help if they got some support. Also when we did the Management of heather we managed to have 40 volunteers coming from towns like Leipzig. They have just been happy to see something new, learn something and help the nature. There is a growing interest to use things out of the landscape. Even if the old use of the trees is coming to an end, the wood is still useful for heating or fore decorating the garden. Many of the volunteer's took some of the wood home to use it for something.



The discussion about the management of tree also shows there is lots of similar things done all over Europe but there is also lots differences and interesting things to have a conversation about. During EVEHD the focus on using products from pollarded and coppiced trees was also in the United Kingdom, Slovakia and Romania.

Romanian pollarded willows and fencing without wire

Satul Verde Association from Romania worked previously in the 'Green Village' project and developed a training module called 'Fencing Without Wire' – in EVEHD we delivered the module to volunteers and made formal learning a part of their successful engagement; therefore putting culture, nature AND education firmly side-by-side.

